ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 20

VILLAGE VOICE
16 April 1985

Central America, American Style

Susan Linfield

Ever since PBS accepted the Starr Foundation as underwriter of a major series on Central America, independent documentarians have dreaded its appearance. After all, Starr is a prime funder of Reaganite think tanks such as the Hoover Institution, the Heritage Foundation, the Institute for Humane Studies (dedicated to "building a network of free-market intellectuals"), Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the (Lewis) Lehrman Institute; it has also funded the Institute for Free Labor Development, the AFL-CIO's Latin American project which, *Mother Jones* asserts, has received "up to $100 million a year in CIA funds."

The show's executive producers, Austin Hoyt and Neal B. Freeman, are not exactly a Sandinista's delight. In the late '70s, Hoyt was executive producer of WBGH's *In Search of the Real America*, which he describes as "an antidote" to the "badmouthing of the country" (episodes included "There's No Business Like Big Business" and "Two Cheers for the CIA"). Freeman produces *American Interests*, a PBS examination of "our" stake in foreign policy issues. He has also produced William Buckley's *Firing Line*, and was briefly Washington correspondent for Buckley's *National Review*.

Crisis in Central America makes it onto the air this week as a four-part "special report" of *Frontline* (April 9 through 12, 9 p.m., Channel 13). The good news is that, contrary to expectations, the show is not the filmed equivalent of a Reagan foreign policy speech. The bad news is, it's boring—the "careful and judicious" approach that *Frontline*'s David Fanning often boasts of has, alas, worked all too well. After awhile, I found myself fantasizing about the murder of the droning narrator whose voice blankets the series—and I didn't really care whether Sandinistas or *contras* got to him first.

Each show examines a discrete aspect of the Central American conflict—or "crisis," as the show insists. Part One, "The Yankee Years," is an archival montage of U.S. involvement in the region from the Spanish-American War of 1898 to the CIA-supported overthrow of Guatemala's elected government in 1954. What emerges is the regularity with which the U.S. has tried to foist its interests on the region. But it's the visual subtext that's most striking—compare the poise of a well groomed *Somozista* to the pain-and-poverty-etched face of a Sandino army veteran as they recount the same events.

But while this focus on "American interests" strengthens the initial segment, it's the downfall of the other three. "Castro's Challenge" presents a peculiarly top-down view of the Cuban Revolution. After making a convincing case for Batista's corruption and the need for change, the filmmakers become obsessed with such events as Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union, Che Guevara's attempts to "export" revolution, and the decision to send Cuban troops to Angola and Ethiopia. The show reveals remarkably little about the internal effects of the revolution on the Cuban people: their standard of living, relations between men and women, the state of education, art, and literature. (All but one of the intellectuals interviewed are in exile.)

Similarly, "Revolution in Nicaragua" scrutinizes the Sandinistas in terms of East-West concerns. After the revolution of 1979, which the show defends as "one of the broadest, most popular movements in the history of Latin America," its focus shifts to Nicaragua's alleged arms shipments to El Salvador and from Cuba. Free enterprise is also a paramount concern: the producers laud the degree of private ownership still extant, but ignore the government's efforts to raise the standard of living. Nevertheless, this is the most absorbing segment; because the Sandinista revolution is relatively recent, and was well-chronicled as it unfolded, the show achieves a "you are there" feel.

"Battle for El Salvador" makes a valiant, if not always accurate, foray into the sticky politics of the Salvadoran opposition. For once, the FMLN-FDR is seen as an alliance of distinct political tendencies, not a monolith. Although the show holds out hope for a peaceful resolution, the intractability of this conflict is evoked in two brief musical passages: Roberto D'Aubuisson's Arena Party lustily singing of El Salvador as "the graveyard of the Reds," while a leftist meeting opens with the "Internationale." The filmmakers seem baffled by Reagan's obsession with this tiny country, even pointing out—with one of those animated maps I haven't seen since grade school—that talk of its strategic importance rings false, since El Salvador doesn't even border the supposedly vital Caribbean Basin.

What makes all this worth watching are the stills, archival footage and interviews the producers have obtained (a press release says they used 67 archival sources, and I believe it). There's Sandino posing arm-in-arm with the elder Somoza shortly before the dictator ordered his murder; four well-coiffed women in tight pants, one holding a gun, riding triumphantly into Havana with Fidel's forces in 1959; the huge public trials of Batista's henchmen in a soccer stadium, complete with a vendor hawking ice cream; Regis Debray speaking of Che's death as the end of a "lyrical illusion"; Carter meeting with the Sandinista leaders, a large box of Cap'n Crunch on an otherwise-empty conference table; and some brief but truly sickening footage of a Salvadoran death squad pushing women into a car and torturing a man at National Guard headquarters.

But the show's thematic structure—its concentration on "crises"—reveals its insistence on viewing the region through the prism of U.S. foreign policy concerns. Cuba is clearly *not* a country in crisis; Nicaragua is in crisis, but largely because the U.S. is trying to overthrow its government. And while El Salvador may be, as the program claims, in a state of "disintegration," it is also, depending on your point of view, in a state of becoming. If there is a crisis in Central America, it may lie less within our neighbors than ourselves. ■